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Ramzan, the month of fasting, is a blessed spiritual period for believers, for it is during this month that they do their utmost to awaken and enhance their spirituality. The aim of fasting during Ramzan is to diminish a person's dependence on material things, so that he may elevate himself to a higher plane of devout living. Abiding by the guidelines of fasting raises believers to a state of humility, truth and honesty.

It was in the month of Ramzan that revelations of the Quran first began to be made to Prophet Muhammad. The objective of fasting has been aptly summed up in this Quranic verse: 'Believers, fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard yourself against evil.' (2:183) Ramzan teaches the believer to uphold truth and refrain from evil and falsehood. It is important, therefore, to reflect upon the Prophet's admonition to believers: 'God does not need the fast of one who does not leave off falsity in speaking or who acts according to his false assertions.' In the Hadith, Ramzan is called the 'month of patience'. The prescribed abstemiousness of this month is designed to train the individual to control all negative feelings, so that he may lead a successful life in this world, for it is negative feelings that place the greatest hurdle in the path of human progress. By the mere observance of a fast, he becomes conditioned to leading a life of moral restraint. As a reassurance to believers, the Quran says: 'Those who persevere patiently will be requited without measure.' (39:10) According to the Prophet, 'Whenever one of you is on a fast, he should be soft in his demeanour. In the event of being abused or provoked, he should simply say that he is on a fast.' According to another tradition of the Prophet, 'There is purification for all things, and purification of the body is fasting.' Just as bathing purifies the body, so does fasting purify the soul. But it must be borne in mind that Ramzan entails much more than fasting; it is the fostering of a culture of abstinence aimed at purification of thought, speech and general behaviour.

Two things make up a human being - body and soul.

While the material part of a person, the body, is indispensable for the performance of mundane tasks, it is his soul which will raise him to higher realities. The mind, or soul, preserved in a state of purity, must be preserved in a state of purity. That means that just as the body requires physical nourishment, so also must the soul be spiritually nourished. Fasting entails cutting oneself off from the world and turning to God; not in a physical sense, but having one's heart and mind continually directed towards God, whatever bodily activity one may be engaged in. When a person has elevated himself from the world, God endows him with wisdom, which emanates from his lips. He is shown the ills of the world, and their remedies. He is brought safely to the abode of peace.

The 'Lailatal-Qadar' (the Night of Destiny) is an important juncture in the last 10 days which bring the period of fasting to a close. On this night angels descend to earth, carrying the commands of God for the coming year. Believers then pray all night, and according to the Quran, praying on this night is better than praying for a thousand months. This night brings wisdom to the human soul. (The author is member of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's Centre for Peace and Spirituality, Delhi.)

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